

Got Music?

A primer on freestyle music selection

BY ELAINE DONOGHUE



ASK PEOPLE TO DESCRIBE THEIR favorite freestyles, and they are likely to name the musical selections first. If you choose the right music, your freestyle can break away from the pack.

Riding to music is both enjoyable and instructive for riders at all levels. Many riders who dabble in music for fun soon develop a passion for freestyle, pas de deux, or quadrille.

Why wait? Start learning the do-re-mi's of musical freestyle now.

The Very Basics

The music you select should accentuate your horse's movement, type, and personality—and should harmonize with your own musical tastes. Choices for dressage freestyle are instrumental-only pieces, instrumentals with lyrics (words) or vocals (“oohs and aahs”), and even choral performances (such as “O Fortuna,” used by German Olympian Ulla Salzgeber and Rusty). Note that, although lyrics are permitted, some judges may find them distracting (see last month’s “Freestyle Connection” for more on this topic).

There are many ways to put together a freestyle. You may select a composer to write a unique piece for the ride; you may elect to hire a freestyle designer; or you can create your own and select your own music. Whatever you decide, follow these helpful guidelines.

The Beat Goes On

Determining your horse's tempos is an important step to finding just the right music for him. The tempo of the gaits is associated with the beats per minute (bpm) of the music. When the two match, the horse literally seems to be dancing.

An important tool to this end is a metronome. Buy one online or at your local music store; some can even be downloaded. You'll use the metronome to count your horse's footfalls at the various gaits and to determine the bpm of pieces of music.

To learn your horse's tempos, start by having someone videotape you riding at the trot, walk, and canter. When you review the footage, count each step of the trot for 60 seconds (or count for fifteen seconds and multiply by four) to calculate the

approximate bpm of this gait. Trot tempos vary widely, from 135 to 165 bpm.

Set your metronome to the bpm you counted and watch the trot footage again. You may notice that the ticking of the metronome does not match your horse step for step. This may be due to factors such as slowing down in the corners to maintain balance, or quickening his pace in a lengthening. Find the spot on the video where your horse is moving his best, and keep replaying that section until you pinpoint the tempo. You may need to move your metronome up and down a bit to determine the exact match. Once you do, you will have found the “target tempo” for your horse's trot.

Use the same process to determine your horse's canter and walk tempos. For canter, count the strike of the leading foreleg for 60 seconds. Common canter tempos range from 93 to 105 bpm. For walk, count the front legs only—far less complicated than counting all four steps, and yielding far more musical choices. Calculated in this way, the average walk tempo ranges from 104 to 112 bpm.

Music, Maestro

Your next step is to find the right music. You may hear the perfect tune on the radio, or you may go all out and hire a composer to create a custom piece for your horse. Explore the limitless songs available by going to your local library, browsing traditional and online music stores, and visiting dressage Web sites that offer databases of freestyle music.

As you listen, imagine yourself riding to the music. If you feel that the beat (the underlying pulse) of the music is a trot, literally post to the beat. Does it feel close to your horse's tempo? If so, you have a prospect. Do a similar process for potential canter and walk music, trying to "feel the beat in your seat."

After you've identified some prospects, set your metronome to your horse's trot tempo and play the trot music. If the bpm is not an exact match, adjust the metronome until the two tempos are fairly close. If the music is within ten bpm of your horse's gait, the music can usually be adjusted to suit your horse.

The process of matching tempos is very important in creating a solo freestyle because the horse becomes the *danseur* in the ballet. In pas de deux and quadrille, all the horses will not always be moving at the same tempos. In these cases, it is more important that the tempo of the music suggests each gait rather than matches any particular horse.

Whatever music you select, you will soon find out that you will be listening to it again and again. Make sure you like your musical selections so they will remain a pleasure to work with.

Flatter Your Horse

The music should enhance the look of your horse's gaits—the quality termed "suitability" on the freestyle score sheet. To determine whether a piece of music is suitable, ride to it and enlist a trainer or some dressage buddies to watch you. Do your eyes on the ground get that "wow" factor? If not, try another piece of music or a different genre.

Create a Program

Whatever music you choose, stay within that genre. Genre is a type or category of music (e.g., classical, country, jazz, Latin, rock). Your freestyle would seem disjointed if you used a classical piece for the walk, threw in a rock song for the trot, and then segued to jazz for the canter. Keep in mind that there are many possible genres and sub-genres: bluegrass, country, swing, baroque, show tunes, movie scores, or orchestral versions of pop and contemporary music.

A themed freestyle can be fun and is another way to connect your music selections. Examples of themes would be to use pieces by the same artist, composer, or musical group. A theme could also be a selection of artists representing a certain format of music; a current example is Olympian Debbie McDonald's Motown-themed freestyle to music by such artists as Aretha Franklin, the Commodores, and the Supremes.

Great Choices

Your final musical selections should meet several criteria. First, be certain that the music tempo matches your horse's tempo. Second, make sure that the selections are suitable for your horse. These two factors will help you create a strong visual impression. Your third consideration is the integrity of the program. Keep it cohesive by selecting pieces that are connected through genre, style, or theme.

Riding to music is a rewarding experience. Unleash your potential and "get music"!

Next month: Putting the right music together. ▲

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